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SUBJECT: SOUTHERN SERBIA: AMBASSADOR HIGHLIGHTS USG INVESTMENT AND
URGES ALBANIANS TO VOTE

¶1. SUMMARY: The Ambassador's 1/17 visit to southern Serbia emphasized USG commitment to the region and support for Albanians to participate in Serbian elections. National and local media covered the Ambassador's opening of a USG and GOS funded commercial road and meeting with Albanian leaders running for parliament. END SUMMARY.

¶2. On 1/17, the Ambassador, Mayor of Bujanovac, Nagip Arifi, and GOS Coordination Body Representatives and inaugurated the Miratovac - Lucane Corridor, which connects central Serbia to the Macedonian border. It extends from Miratovac (Presevo) to Lucane (Bujanovac), and is 33.15 km long and links seven villages in a significant part of the valley that were previously connected only by a small dirt road. The completion of the Corridor, valued at a total of \$6.4 million, is a joint success of the GOS, local communities, and the USG. It was initiated through USAID's Community Revitalization through Democratic Action (CRDA-E) program, and includes \$2.9 million from the USG, a GOS Coordination Body matching contribution of \$2.8 million, and local community contribution of \$700,000.

¶3. Because of this road, citizens now have better access to locally available services, such as medical care, local government, educational institutions, and businesses. Even at this point, a significant investment of local resources has already begun along the corridor, and some of the burgeoning business opportunities were showcased at an exhibit for the Ambassador. In public remarks commemorating the event, the Ambassador said the road is a tangible product of USG investment and partnership among the international community, local partners and the GOS. There were several enthusiastic receptions (and signs thanking the US) by local residents for the Ambassador and Mayor Arifi during their tour of the corridor.

¶4. The Ambassador also met with the Presevo Valley Albanians running for parliament in the 1/21 Serbian elections. In a public meeting with the ten candidates including Riza Halimi (PVD), Skender Destani (DUD) and Nagip Arifi (PVD), the Ambassador expressed strong USG support for Presevo Valley Albanians to vote in Serbia's parliamentary elections in Serbia and take part in the creation of the country's and the region's future. The Ambassador said a boycott (which has been called for by some Presevo Valley Albanians) only hurts the electorate's ability to have its voice heard in Belgrade. The Ambassador drew a parallel with the Contact Group's support for Kosovo Serbs to participate in Kosovo institutions. The Presevo Valley Albanians thanked the Ambassador for his and the USG's support, noting that "any help from the United States is always close to our heart." Halimi says they are optimistic for two MPs, noting that if the diaspora could vote "three would be possible." Destani noted that the Ambassador's visit "will increase

the number of voters" among the Presevo Valley Albanian community.

15. COMMENT: The Ambassador's visit and calls for Albanians to participate in Serbia's elections follows a similar visit by the UK Ambassador last week and messages from Pristina, Tirana, Belgrade and the OSCE. The visit helped emphasize the linkage between USG investment in the region and the Contact Group principle of integrating southern Serbia firmly with Belgrade. The participation of Presevo Valley Albanians in Serbia's election are a huge political success for our efforts in Southern Serbia. Albanian representation in the Serbian parliament would represent a big step forward for communities from this part of Serbia. END COMMENT.
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